

## [How land grabs hurt Africa](#)

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By Joshua Alter



Wealthy states are currently purchasing millions of hectares of land in poor states throughout Africa.

This is a problem for many reasons, including increasing rural poverty and driving millions of people off land that they have been farming for generations. These land purchases also have environmental effects and are resulting in food shortages and food insecurity across Africa.

This paper discusses this controversial practice and concludes that these land purchases should be considered land grabs. The paper focuses on the environmental effects that such land grabs have.

The paper also tangentially discusses the social effects of these land grabs on the communities in which they are taking place. The paper concludes that African states must immediately recognise that these deals have environmental repercussions that harm not only the natural resources, but their citizens as well; and should thus put measures in place to curb the incidences and conclusion of these deals.

### Framing the problem

Africa has over half of the world's arable, yet unused land. The NGO, Rights and Resources Initiative, estimates that 500 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa depend on 3.46 billion acres of community held farmland, and that this land has been a primary target of foreign governments and investors.

Over the last decade, food-importing nations and private companies have purchased land in poorer states, including in Africa.

By all accounts, land grabbing is intensifying and spreading, especially in rural Africa.

NGOs estimate that in Eastern Africa alone, 310 land deals have been completed since 2000.

The NGO, International Land Coalition, estimates that from 2000 to 2010, about 261 million acres of arable land, much of it in Africa, were acquired by investors. The DRC and Ethiopia are two of the three states that have seen the largest amount of their land acquired since 2000.

In DRC, investors acquired 19.9 million acres in 10 deals; in Ethiopia, investors acquired 13.2 million acres in 83 deals.

Although investors usually say that these land purchases will create local jobs and improve technology to improve crop outputs, these benefits rarely materialise. Further, companies generally use their own labour force and rarely share their technology and expertise.

Oxfam calculates that land acquired globally between 2000 and 2010 has the potential to feed a billion people, the same number of people who currently go to bed hungry each night.

In Africa alone, foreign investors have acquired land the size of Kenya for agriculture.

This land should be put to better purposes that will benefit local communities. How this can best be accomplished is the focus of this paper.

#### World Bank role

The World Bank refers to these land purchases as “agro-investment” and created seven voluntary principles in an attempt to make the practice “responsible”.

For instance, Principle 3 states that “processes relating to investment in agriculture are transparent, monitored, and ensure accountability by all stakeholders, within a proper business, legal, and regulatory environment”.

Principle 7 states that “environmental impacts of a project are quantified and measures taken to encourage sustainable resource use, while minimising the risk/magnitude of negative impacts and mitigating them”.

If these principles were actually adhered to, land purchases would be positive transactions. However, these principles are not currently adhered to in a way that makes the transactions a positive experience for both sides.

Oxfam claims that since 2008, 21 formal complaints have been brought against the World Bank by communities claiming that their land rights have been violated.

These complaints bring up the very concerns that the principles attempt to guard against. The World Bank rejected a call to suspend its involvement in large-scale agricultural land acquisitions.

However, the World Bank’s inspection panel, an independent accountability mechanism, is calling for an investigation into complaints about the Bank’s policies and procedures in Ethiopia.

Groups opposed to the practice of land grabs claim that the World Bank is partially responsible for these land grabs for two reasons. First, World Bank policies caused African governments to privatise land and focus on industrial farming.

Second, by providing capital and guarantees to big multinational investors, the World Bank is exacerbating the global rush for farmland.

#### Implications of land grabs

The International Land Coalition, a global network of civil society and farmers' organisations, noted that land acquisitions by foreign entities were causing major environmental and agricultural damage along the River Niger. Specifically, foreign entities were responsible for siphoning water for vast swaths of farmland.

In Uganda "small-scale farming and forestry that protected unique wildlife, heritage and food is being converted to palm oil wastelands that only profit agribusinesses".

In cases like these, the impact of land grabs is clear: multinational companies are using natural resources in quantities and at paces that vastly exceed what would be used by local communities.

The result is a worsening of the land.

If the fruit of these labours was going to the local communities, perhaps that would be acceptable. However, this is unfortunately not the case.

In addition to environmental concerns, land grabs also have social ramifications. Land grabs expose poor people to hunger, violence and the threat of a lifetime in poverty.

Furthermore, land grabs result in the displacement of local people, which is detrimental to their human rights.

In the Uganda example referenced above, a community claimed that they were forcefully evicted from their land to make way for a tree plantation.

Land grabs also increase the risk of food shortages and contribute to food insecurity for Africans.

China, Saudi Arabia and other similarly situated states are purchasing African land to grow staple food crops.

However, these states are purchasing the land in order to manage domestic food needs.

By selling food rights to other states, African states are profiting at the expense of their own citizens. As an example, Madagascar's outgoing President agreed to sell a South Korean company a third of its arable land for US\$6 billion.

This deal was being consummated while half of Madagascar's citizens were suffering from food shortages.

In these instances, the negative effects of land grabs are being borne by Africans.

First, developed and rich states are using developing and poor states to feed their citizens. However, this comes at great expense because local communities go hungry while their land is being used to support people on other continents.

Second, land investors and speculators often sit on high-value land without cultivating it, hoping instead to sell it for a profit.

A related problem occurs when the land is used to grow biofuels instead of food.

For instance, researchers in Mozambique found that from 2007 to 2009, only seven percent of land purchased by investors was planted with food crops.

In these instances, local communities go hungry while land close by is left fallow or used for non-food purposes.

#### Solutions

In order to protect African land, African governments must collectively step up their efforts to address these problems.

First, African governments must strengthen land registration and title for local communities. Second, African governments must implement strategies to keep enough African grown food on African soil.

African governments use the lack of an authoritative land registration regime to make it easy for foreign investors to purchase land that local communities have long depended on.

Since certain local communities cannot demonstrate formal ownership, host governments are easily able to transfer this land, even though it has devastating effects. The lack of secure land tenure is responsible for the buying spree that has occurred throughout Africa.

Those who use land without formal legal title are the most vulnerable and in a majority of African states, these people lack protection.

Therefore, African governments must acknowledge that local communities may possess land, even if there is not a formal legal title attached. They must ease restrictions on such groups so that they may keep land that they have farmed for generations and not be displaced.

The need for African governments to ensure that enough African grown food remains on the continent cannot be overemphasised.

One way to do this would be export controls, whereby a certain amount of food grown through these concessions would have to remain in the host states.

Thus, states like Saudi Arabia and South Korea could continue using African soil to ensure their domestic food security, without making African citizens food insecure.

This would also benefit the host state, as they would still be able to sell land rights to foreign entities.

Finally, African governments must acknowledge that the current norm is not the best way forward.

“There is increasing evidence from case-studies that large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries to create ‘mega-farms’ are a type of investment which is the least likely to generate significant net benefits to the host country and the local community in terms of agricultural development.”

Rather, African governments should consider alternatives that include smallholders, like “contract farming, outgrower schemes and joint ventures with farmer organizations.”

With over half of the world’s arable yet unused land, there are almost limitless opportunities for Africa in terms of land development and food security.

Africa possesses over half of the world’s arable yet unused land. But instead of using this land to eradicate hunger on the African continent, investors, speculators, and foreign governments began purchasing land to shore up their own food needs and make money.

African governments should instead sell such land to African entities, or at the very least, entities that will be required to keep a portion of all grown food in the host state to feed the populace. African governments must also reform land tenure and land registration laws to ensure that their citizens are not forced off land that they have farmed for generations.

Only when African states control their land can they ensure that their citizens do not go hungry. -  
Consultancy Africa Intelligence